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ABSTRACT

Structural, functional and design features are described for the Montessori School building of Stamford, Connecticut. Emphasis is given to the utilization of a precast concrete building system and the flexibility of the early learning center spaces. The report is heavily illustrated with photographs. (FS)

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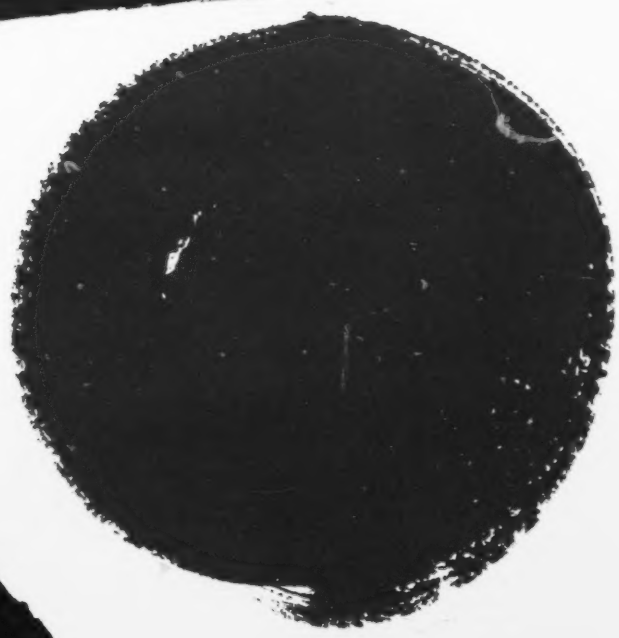
The Early Learning Center



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PROFILES OF
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A REPORT FROM
EDUCATIONAL
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The Early Learning Center

STAMFORD,

CONNECTICUT

by Sherwood Kohn

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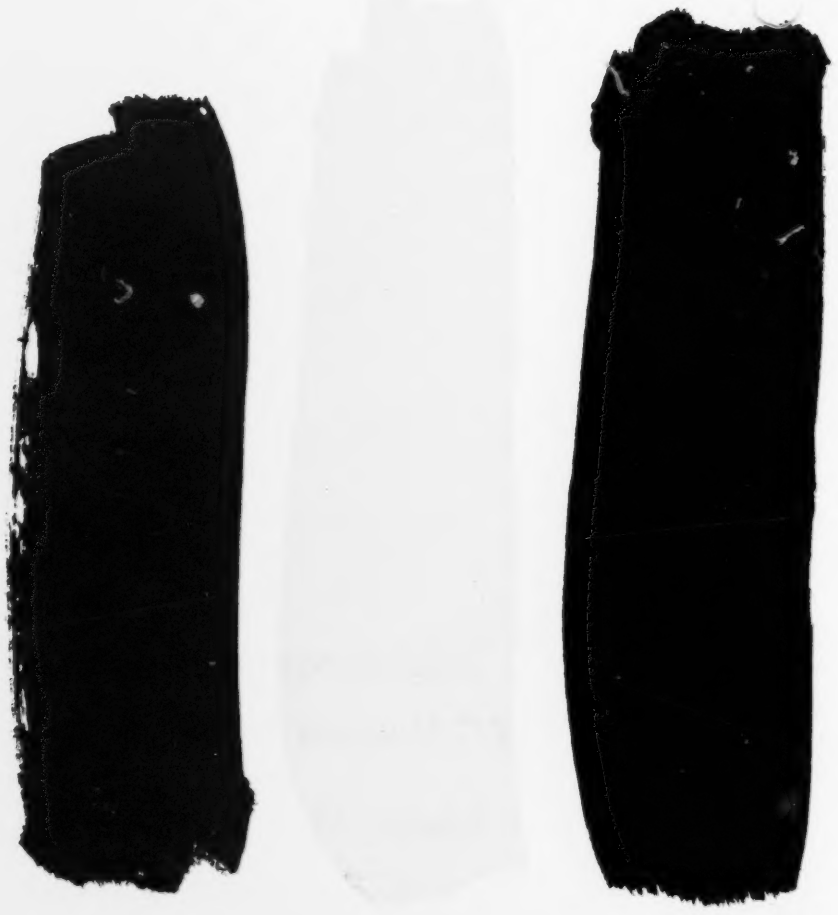

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FOREWORD

Late in 1966 EFL gave a $4,000 grant to the Montessori School of Stamford to assist the school in the planning of its proposed new building. The grant was used to good advantage, and the school, renamed The Early Learning Center, opened its doors in 1967. Because there are few adequate, let alone excellent, examples of facilities for early childhood education, EFL believed that this strikingly successful building should be better known. Consequently, EFL granted the school $20,900 to make a film about the principles which were the basis of its design.

This report was prepared to supplement that film and to introduce The Early Learning Center to people who haven't seen the film. The film, incidentally, is available to architectural, educational, or community groups.

See page 27 for information on where to send for it.

EDUCATIONAL FACILITIES LABORATORIES

THE EARLY LEARNING CENTER STAMFORD, CONNECTICUT

To many people, the idea of elaborate preparation implies restraint, confinement, and impersonality, the discipline of an imposed structure. But Margaret Skutch's Early Learning Center in Stamford, Conn., one of the few well-designed facilities for early childhood education in the United States, is at once free, open, warm, and intensively planned. Perhaps that is because it owes as much to its founder's insistence on personal involvement as it does to its harmony with Maria Montessori's theory of a "prepared environment."

Mrs. Skutch founded The Early Learning Center in 1964 because she felt that her own children—then preschoolers—were not being properly educated. Other parents felt the same way, and within a short time the Center's enrollment had grown large enough to occupy a church basement. Characteristically, after three years of coping with inadequate facilities and inconvenient space, the energetic Mrs. Skutch decided to build a new school, rather than convert an existing structure to her requirements. With a grant

from EFL, Mrs. Skutch was able to explore various design options, then she retained architect Egon Ali-Oglu of Cambridge, Mass., to design the school because his Componoform building system seemed practical and economical.

The present plant, a 4,000-sq ft, one-story concrete schoolhouse built with modular units, cost only $14 a sq ft exclusive of site preparation and took only seven months to plan and construct. A 16,000-sq ft addition, incorporating a library, teacher-training facility, and day care center is scheduled for completion in June, 1970.

The Early Learning Center is designed and operated for children between the ages of 2 and 8, but the age will be raised to 12 when the new addition opens.

In a very real sense, adults are merely tolerated in the school, not only by the children, but also by the building itself.

In fact, everything about the school—its quality, its air of pleasant utility, its concern for art and good taste—is shaped to assure its young occupants that their teachers, and the environment in which they spend three to five hours a day, five days a week, respect them as rational, social, inquisitive individuals.

One of The Early Learning Center's fundamental concepts holds that education, or more precisely, the acquisition of knowledge, takes place anywhere, everywhere, at any time. The learning process, says Mrs. Skutch, does not require a formal sequence. It can result from random experiences, and information may be more readily assimilated informally than when presented as part of a rigid progression.

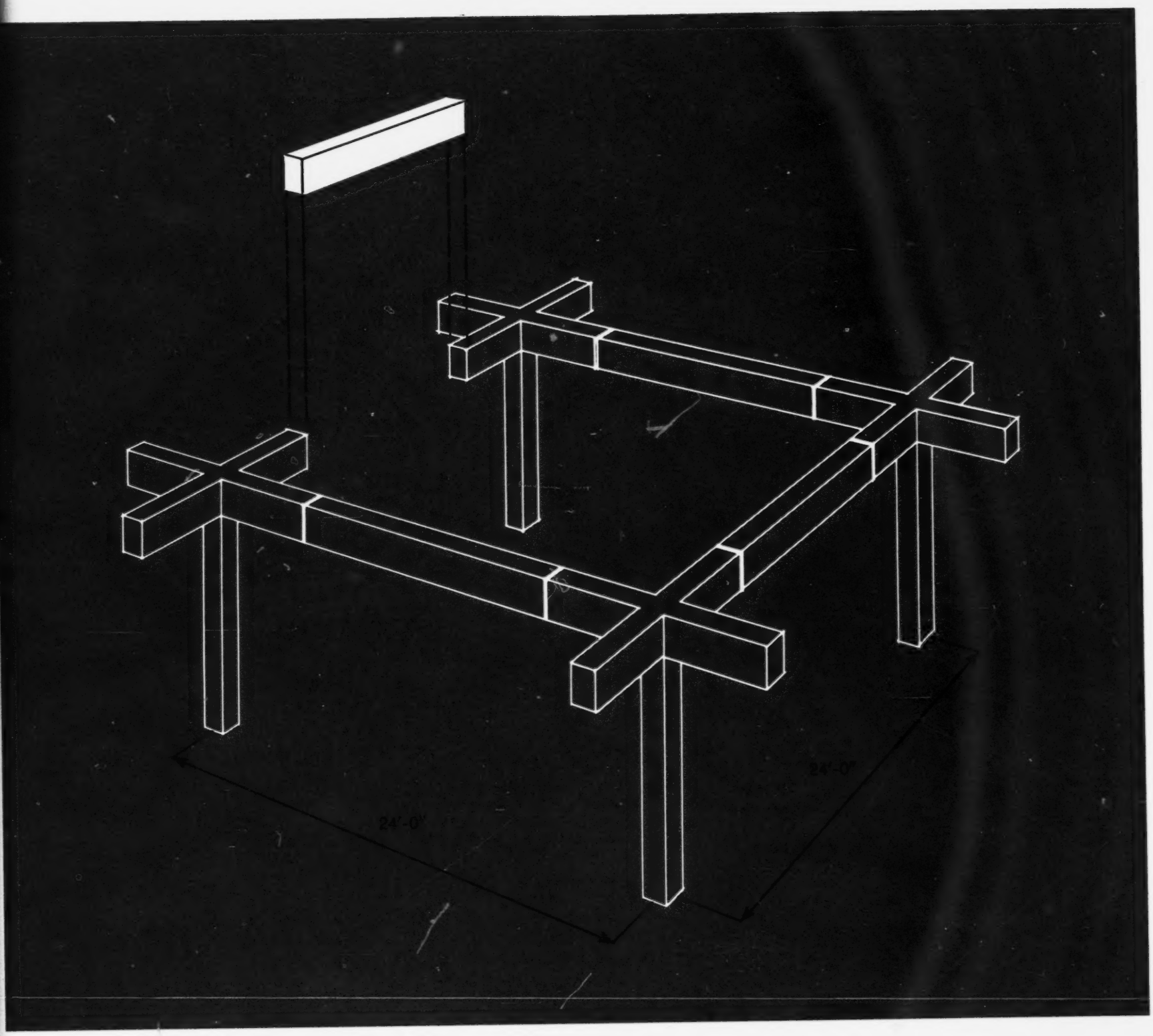
The Early Learning Center is a notable piece of architecture that is as free and open and warm as the philosophy that underlies it.

Scale

The Early Learning Center was designed with children in mind. Scale is crucial. Its effects are most obvious in the storage which primarily is open shelving. These low, sturdy ledges, made of boards laid on concrete blocks, are strong enough for the children to play on, easily demountable, and highly accessible. Free-standing, they also serve as room dividers (the division is more psychological than physical), eliminating the necessity for partitions and creating protected bays for specialized activity within the open room. And since the shelves perform

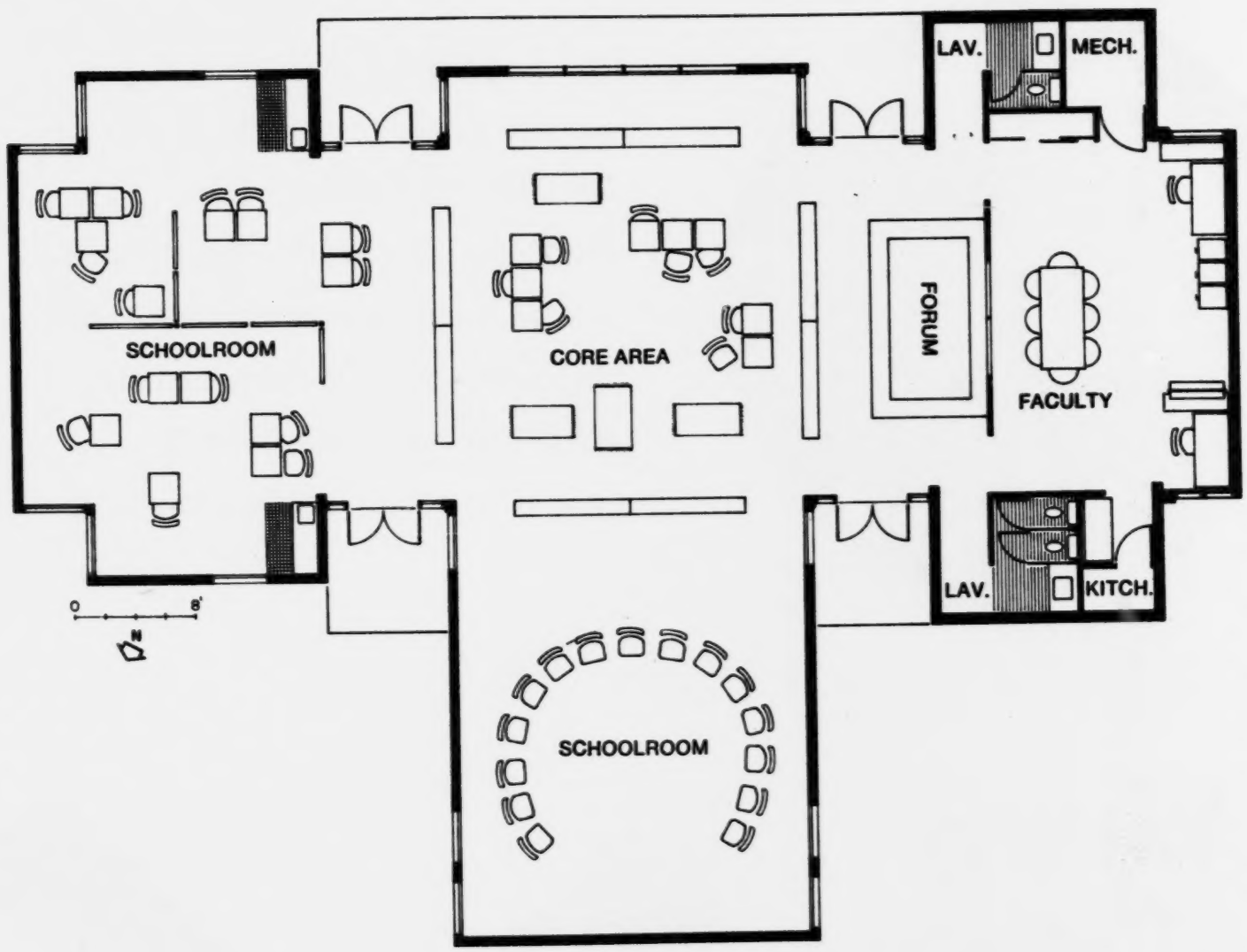
multiple functions, i.e.,
those of furniture, teaching aids,
dividers, and storage units,
they leave the school's walls
free for display, learning space,
and broad windows
that extend to floor level.
Perhaps most important

of all, the shelves provide Margaret Skutch with an instrument through which she communicates a sense of respect for her students and which she daily tunes to the emotional and intellectual needs of the children.



Building System

Componoform, a precast concrete building system with stub beams cantilevered from columns, forms the basic element of The Early Learning Center. Columns, beams, and walls can be precast in a factory, hauled to the site, and assembled on a poured slab, thereby cutting construction



time and substantially reducing costs. The modular scheme of the school, based on nearly square bays surrounding a square core, forms a cruciform plan that echoes its Componoform unit, simplifying planning and affording freedom to shape and expand the original structure in four directions.

The old one-room schoolhouse encased a rigid curriculum in a single environment. Although The Early Learning Center, strictly defined, is a one-room schoolhouse, it provides a wide choice of both subjects and environments. Architecturally and pedagogically, it offers its students

Variety of space and use in a single room

options; the opportunity to choose
freely among many good paths to learning.
It is what its architect, Egon Ali-Oglu,
calls omnidirectional space:

a single, unobstructed room offering a variety of milieus;
quiet corners, busy courtyards, light and dark places, open areas,
protected nooks, spaces for contemplation and places for work, even the
easy choice of indoors and outdoors.

Forum

A table plus a chair plus a child equals 10 legs. Multiply that by the number of tables, chairs, and children in a conventional classroom and the decapod becomes a thicket of multipedal inhibitions. Furniture is therefore kept to a minimum in The Early Learning Center. Wall-to-wall acrylic carpeting, which deadens noise and encourages children to sit, stand, or sprawl wherever they please, is a key factor in the design for unencumbered simplicity. The "forum," an 8-by-12-ft sunken arena, eliminates the necessity for chair-grouping. It is an uncluttered gathering place, a conversation pit, or a space for conferences. A flanking one-way glass wall allows visitors to observe without disturbing the children.

Children teach children

The Early Learning Center employs no set curriculum, does not separate children into formal classes or grades, and imposes no requirements for

the mastery of specific skills. Children between the ages of two and eight mingle and work together in the same room, and the mix often results in mutual learning experiences that are sometimes more effective than the

usual pupil-teacher relationship, even though that is frequently on a one-to-one basis in this highly individualized school.

Things teach people

Margaret Skutch feels that materials are at least as important as what a teacher says to her students. Montessori beads and blocks teach children to count. Textured shapes teach children to recognize letters and numbers.

An electric typewriter helps them learn the alphabet. At the same time, The Early Learning Center rejects formal, sequential learning in favor of random experience. Even the structure of the building affords valuable instructional aid. The exposed columns and beams allow the children

to see how the roof is held up,
and walls can be seen
to be independent but a
strong part of the architectural form.
The building speaks to the child
as part of a carefully
prepared environment.

EDUCATIONAL PROGRAM

Ungraded, informal, Montessori-style program for ages between 2 and 8. Will be raised to 12 when addition is completed. Future plans include teacher-training program.

PHYSICAL PLANT

School opened Nov. 1967. Enrollment expected to reach 100 students. Floor area 4,000 sq ft, 16,000 sq ft to be added on present 2-acre site. Original cost: Building only, $59,000 ($14.75 per sq ft) ; Total cost, including fees, site preparation, furniture, $76,000 ($19 per sq ft). Structure based on Componoform building system, with 24-ft by 24-ft bays. School is fully carpeted, except in arts and crafts area. Heating: Electric cables in floor slab, and electric baseboards.

ADMINISTRATION

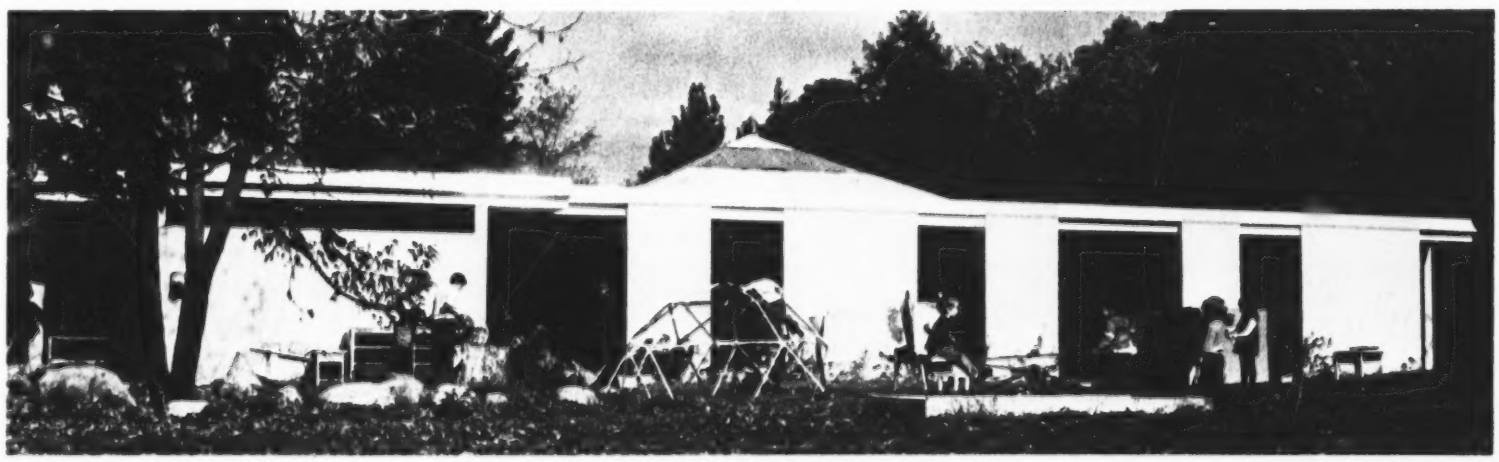
Mrs. Margaret Skutch, Directress, The Early Learning Center, Inc., 12 Gary Road, Stamford, Conn. 06903

ARCHITECT

Egon Ali-Oglu, Cambridge, Mass.

"ROOM TO LEARN"

a 22-minute, 16mm color film showing The Early Learning Center in operation and outlining its basic concepts is available on free-loan from Association Films, Inc., 600 Madison Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10022, and for purchase at $125.00 from Association Films, Inc. "Room to Learn" was underwritten by EFL.



Other reports from EFL

The following publications are available without charge from the offices of EFL:
477 Madison Avenue, New York 10022.

A College in the City: An Alternative

A report of a new approach to the planning of urban campuses, with facilities dispersed through the community, designed to serve community needs and to stimulate community redevelopment.

Bricks and Mortarboards

A guide for the decision-makers in higher education: how the colleges and universities can provide enough space for the burgeoning enrollments of this decade; how the space can be made adaptable to the inevitable changes in the educational process in the decades ahead. (One copy available without charge. Additional copies $1.00.)

Campus in the City

EFL's annual report for 1967 and an essay on the physical problems and trends in planning of urban colleges and universities and their potential role as a catalyst in the remaking of the cities.

College Students Live Here

A report on the what, why, and how of college housing; reviews the factors involved in planning, building, and financing student residences.

Design for ETV—Planning for Schools with Television

A report on facilities, present and future, needed to accommodate instructional television and other new educational programs. Prepared for EFL by Dave Chapman, Inc., Industrial Design.

Design for Paperbacks: A How-To Report on Furniture for Fingertip Access

Physical solutions to the problems of displaying paperback books for easy use.

Educational Change and Architectural Consequences

A report on school design that reviews the wide choice of options available to those concerned with planning new facilities or updating old ones.

The Impact of Technology on the Library Building

A position paper reporting an EFL conference on this subject.

Relocatable School Facilities

A survey of portable, demountable, mobile, and divisible schoolhousing in use in the United States and a plan for the future.

The Schoolhouse in the City

An essay on how the cities are designing and redesigning their schoolhouses to meet the problems of real estate costs, population shifts, segregation, poverty, and ignorance.

The School Library: Facilities for Independent Study in the Secondary School

A report on facilities for independent study, with standards for the size of collections, seating capacity, and the nature of materials to be incorporated.

School Scheduling by Computer/The Story of GASP

A report of the computer program developed by MIT to help colleges and high schools construct their complex master schedules.

SCSD: The Project and the Schools

A second report on the project to develop a school building system for a consortium of 13 California school districts.

Transformation of the Schoolhouse

A report on educational innovations in the schoolhouse during the last decade. With financial data for the year 1968.

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A series of reports which provide information on some of the latest developments in school planning, design, and construction.

Schools without Walls—

open space and how it works.

Three High Schools Revisited:

Andrews, McPherson, and Nova.

Middle Schools—

controversy and experiment.

On the Way to Work:

Five vocationally oriented schools.

CASE STUDIES OF
EDUCATIONAL FACILITIES

A series of reports which provide information on specific solutions to problems in school planning and design.

8. The Schools and Urban Renewal

A case study of the Wooster Square renewal project in New Haven, Connecticut.

9. Air Structures for School Sports

A study of air-supported shelters as housing for playfields, swimming pools, and other physical education activities.

10. The New Campus in Britain: Ideas of Consequence for the United States

Recent British experience in university planning and its implications for American educators, architects, and planners.

11. Divisible Auditoriums

Operable walls convert little-used auditoriums and theaters into multipurpose, highly utilized space for the performing arts and instruction.

12. The High School Auditorium: Six Designs for Renewal

Renovation of little-used auditoriums in old and middle-aged schools to accommodate contemporary educational, dramatic, and music programs.

13. Experiment in Planning an Urban High School

The Baltimore Charette

TECHNICAL REPORTS

1. Acoustical Environment of School Buildings

Acoustics of academic space in schools. An analysis of the statistical data gathered from measurement and study.

2. Total Energy

On-site electric power generation for schools and colleges, employing a single energy source to provide light, heat, air conditioning, and hot water.

3. 20 Million for Lunch.

A primer to aid school administrators in planning and evaluating school food service programs.

COLLEGE NEWSLETTER

A periodical on design questions for colleges and universities.

Designed by John Morning
Printed by Herst Litho Incorporated
Photographs by Jonathan King and George Zimbel